



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students with disabilities report one or more of the following conditions: a specific learning disability, a visual impairment, hearing loss, deafness, a speech impairment, an orthopedic impairment, or a health impairment. Research has found that students with disabilities are an increasing subpopulation at postsecondary institutions. In the 2015–2016 academic year, approximately 19% of all enrolled undergraduate students reported having a disability.

Although students with disabilities in higher education are protected by state, federal, and local laws that prohibit discrimination and mandate access to appropriate services and resources for people with disabilities, postsecondary institutions still face challenges in supporting them.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

- An increasing number of students with disabilities pursued higher education in the academic year 2015–2016. In that year:
  - 19% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having a disability;
  - 19% of male students and 20% of female students reported having a disability;
  - 26% of undergraduates who identified as a veteran reported having a disability;
  - 23% of undergraduates ages 30 and older, 11% of undergraduates ages 24 to 29, and 18% of undergraduates ages 15 to 23 reported having a disability; and
  - 14% of Native American students, 15% of Asian students, 15% of Pacific Islander students, 17% of Black students, 18% of Hispanic students, and 21% of White students reported having a disability.

### ENROLLMENT

- During the 2008–2009 academic year, 88% of postsecondary institutions reported that they enrolled students with disabilities.
  - 79% of institutions enrolled students with an attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); 76% enrolled students with mobility limitations or orthopedic impairments; and 76% enrolled students with a mental illness or a psychological or psychiatric condition.
- As was noted earlier, 19% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having a disability in 2015–2016.
  - 35% of full-time undergraduate students reported having a disability while about 65% of part-time students reported having a disability.
  - Overall, students with disabilities would most likely be enrolled in fewer credits.

### CHALLENGES

- According to a report by the Government Accountability Office in 2009, challenges faced by postsecondary institutions in serving students with disabilities include:
  - Lack of resources and services to accommodate a broad range of students with disabilities;
  - Lack of awareness and experience among faculty members regarding legal requirements and best practices in supporting students with disabilities;
  - Lack of awareness among students with disabilities of their rights and the responsibility of their institutions to accommodate them; and
  - Lack of awareness among students with disabilities of the accommodations and services available to them at their institution.
- According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, applying for accommodations can be a cumbersome process, and students who don't receive support early face an increased risk of not graduating.

## SOURCES

[Disability Status of Undergraduate Students, by Age, Institution Type, Financial Aid, and Enrollment Status: 2012.](#) National Center for Education Statistics, 2012.

[Higher Education and Disability: Education Needs a Coordinated Approach to Improve Its Assistance to Schools in Supporting Students.](#) Government Accountability Office, 2009.

[Students with Disabilities.](#) National Center for Education Statistics, 2016.

[Students with Disabilities at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions.](#) National Center for Education Statistics, 2011.

[Students with Disabilities. National Center for Education Statistics,](#) 2019.

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